

Knowledge and Zeal *Romans 9:30-10:4*

Believe it or not, I used to change the oil in our cars. I would drive our cars up on ramps in our driveway, crawl under the car, drain the oil, change the oil filter, replace the plug, pour in more oil, and call it good. I did this for many years, all the while thinking I was saving all sorts of money.

The problem was that changing the oil was the **ONLY** maintenance I was doing on our cars. I didn't know that you need to check the transmission fluid; I didn't know the tires needed to be rotated; I didn't know that various part of the car need a shot of grease from time to time. It turns out that what I saved on oil changes I spent many times over in repairs I wouldn't have needed if I'd done some preventative maintenance. I had a basic lack of knowledge (a.k.a. ignorance) about auto mechanics. I didn't lack effort; I lacked knowledge. And I paid for it dearly.

We need to be aware of similar dynamics in the spiritual realm. A lack of knowledge about God and His ways will cost us dearly. In our day it's common - so very common - for people to say things like, "It doesn't really matter **what** you believe, as long as you believe **something**." There's a common theology in our culture that says that the content of your faith doesn't matter as long as you're sincere and as long as you give it a good effort.

The Bible would fully agree that effort is important; as with anything else that's valuable, we are to expend energy and effort in seeking God. But the Bible would strongly disagree with the notion that it doesn't really matter **what** you believe. The Bible tells us that God has a well-defined character; certain things are true about Him and other things are untrue about Him. God relates to people in specific ways (and not in other ways). A lack of knowledge (ignorance) about who God is and how He relates to us will cost us dearly. We will expend all sorts of effort and end up frustrated and empty.

In today's passage Paul diagnoses the unbelief of Israel in his day. He will say that "they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (10:2). They were serious about their faith. They expended great effort in seeking God. But because they lacked knowledge about Jesus Christ, they missed God. This passage warns and encourages each of us to make sure that our relationship with God is based on knowledge (instead of conventional wisdom or cultural norms).

An Example to Avoid: Zeal without Knowledge (Romans 9:30-10:4)

In verses 30 and 31 Paul points out that the Gentiles **attained** something that they **weren't** pursuing, and Israel **did not attain** what they **were** pursuing.

30 What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; 31 but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.

When Paul says that “Gentiles . . . did not pursue righteousness,” he’s talking about the righteousness that God gives. Many Gentiles lived morally upright lives, but they didn’t pursue the type of righteousness God provides. You and I both know people who seek to live honest and moral lives but really don’t have much interest in God. Paul says that such people who didn’t pursue God’s righteousness nevertheless “attained it” when they accepted the truth of the gospel. Back in Romans 1:16-17 Paul stated very boldly:

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Even though they weren’t pursuing righteousness, God sent His one and only Son to die for them. And then God sent them messengers to let them know what He had done. Even though they weren’t pursuing righteousness, when they heard the gospel they believed and were justified (declared righteous) by faith.

By contrast, Israel did pursue “a law that would lead to righteousness.” I think Paul is talking about the Mosaic law, the old covenant. Many within Israel were serious about keeping the law, thinking that through obedience they could attain righteousness. In verse 32 Paul explains that they didn’t attain what they were after because of their orientation toward works righteousness instead of faith.

32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, 33 as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Back in chapters 3 and 4 Paul argued that the Law was never intended to be a religious system whereby their works gave them a right standing with God. Righteousness was always credited to a person based on his/her faith. Paul pointed out that long before the Law was given “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3, Genesis 15:6). The Law (the old covenant) was the way that Jews who were justified by faith expressed their devotion to God. The people of Israel, by and large, failed to attain righteousness because “they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works.”

And in the first century when righteousness was offered to them through faith in Jesus, “They stumbled over the stumbling stone” - a reference to Jesus, the Messiah. The Old Testament contains rich imagery in which the Messiah is referred to as the “cornerstone” of the Temple that God would lay in Zion/Israel (see Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22). The Messiah would be the foundational block in the Temple. Your response to this “stone” was key. If you were offended by Him and if you therefore rejected Jesus as the Messiah, He would be “a stone of stumbling”: you would trip over Him and would “fall”; instead of standing secure in God’s presence, you would be brought low. But if you “believe in him” you “will not be put to shame”: you will be able to stand before God without shame.

Notice how Paul took no joy or satisfaction in the fact that his fellow Jews largely rejected Jesus and therefore stumbled over Him:

1 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

You can tell what a person cares most deeply about by what s/he prays. Prayer takes focus and spiritual energy; prayer is a spiritual investment that only God knows about. Paul mentions here that he prays to God for Israel's salvation. Paul was living out Jesus' teaching that we should "love [our] enemies and pray for those who persecute [us]" (Matthew 5:44).

In verses 2 and 3 Paul gives the diagnosis that is so insightful and instructive for us:

2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

In the Bible having "zeal" (or being zealous) is almost always a positive virtue. For example, in Titus 2:14 Paul wrote that believers are to be "zealous for good deeds." Here Paul commends his fellow Jews because "they have a zeal for God" - they were "passionately committed" (TDNT) to God. They weren't lukewarm or apathetic when it came to their relationship with God; they had a zeal for God.

The problem, however, was that their zeal for God was "not according to knowledge"; it wasn't informed by the truth. Throughout Scripture knowledge is a precious commodity - something to be pursued, understood, and lived out. When it comes to our relationship with God, it's not enough to be sincere and to try hard. Our relationship with God needs to be informed by what is actually true about Him. This conviction is reflected in Paul's writings. And it is reflected in his recorded prayers. Consider, for example, Colossians 1:9-10:

9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Paul prayed that the Colossians would be "filled with the knowledge of His will" so that they'd have wisdom and understanding. This practical knowledge of what God really wants would fuel the way they lived their lives. Notice the progression in verse 10. They would "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord"; they would live in a way that reflected His supreme worth. They would be "fully pleasing to Him"; God would take pleasure in them. They would "bear fruit in every good work"; God would bless their efforts with fruitfulness. Finally, they would "increase in the knowledge of God." They would have a deeper experiential knowledge of God. It all began by being filled with the knowledge of His will.

Without this knowledge of God's will, the Colossians might be very sincere and might try very hard, but they would live unworthy, unfruitful lives. They would be like the guy who says, "The bad news is that I'm going the wrong direction. But the good news is that I'm making GREAT time." Knowledge is valuable because it points us in the right direction. Knowledge tells us how to align our lives with reality. This is why the Scriptures urge us to meditate on God's word (Psalm 1, Colossians 3:16, etc.) - so that our lives are saturated with this type of knowledge. (For another example, see Philippians 1:9.)

Back in Romans 10, notice again the consequences of Israel lacking this knowledge of God and His will.

2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

Because they were "ignorant of the righteousness of God" (the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus), they sought to "establish their own." Paul is probably talking here about a type of self-righteousness based on the "works of the law" (9:31-32; see also 10:5). In Philippians 3 Paul wrote that before he came to faith in Christ he was characterized by zeal and self-righteousness: ". . . as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Phil. 3:6). But now that he'd come to Christ, he had a very different ambition:

8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—

Paul's fellow Jews were right where he was before Christ: seeking to establish their own righteousness instead of accepting the righteousness from God that He gives to all who believe in Jesus. Even though God provided this righteousness at the highest possible personal cost, they "did not submit" to it; they refused to believe.

This is all the more tragic in light of what Paul writes in verse 4:

4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

The term translated "end" (*telos*) can have a couple of different meanings. It can mean "end" in the sense of the **termination** of something: "Will this sermon ever come to an end?!?!?" It can also mean "end" in the sense of a **goal**: "The ends don't justify the means." It's likely that Paul had both of these meanings in mind when he wrote that Christ is the end of the law.

When Christ inaugurated the new covenant through His blood, the law (the old covenant) became obsolete; its **jurisdiction came to an end**. The law no longer defines how a person relates to God. Christ marks the termination of the law. The Law

still reveals the character of God, and there is much we can learn from the Law (it is still inspired by God and profitable - 2 Timothy 3:16). But its jurisdiction came to an end.

Christ was also ***the goal and the fulfillment of the law***. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said this:

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Jesus “fulfilled” the Law and the Prophets in the sense that He gave the OT Scriptures their fullest expression. If you want to know what the Law was all about, fix your eyes on Jesus. For example, Jesus fulfilled the the sacrificial system of the old covenant by becoming the spotless Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.

And so to reject Christ was to reject the righteousness that God offers. But the opposite is also true: through Christ the righteousness of God is available “to everyone who believes” (10:4). It doesn’t matter if you are Jew or Gentile. It doesn’t matter if you’ve gone to church your entire life or if this is the first time you’ve ever been to worship. It doesn’t matter if you’ve lived a very moral, respectable life or if you’ve been living in a way that violates every standard of morality. God gives righteousness ***to everyone who believes***.

Application. This passage has two main implications. First, each of us needs to make sure that we have accepted God’s righteousness through faith in Jesus (instead of trying to establish “a righteousness of our own”).

In our day and in our culture, there are several ways in which people commonly try to establish a righteousness of their own. For example, if you think that at the end of your life God will put your good deeds on one side of the scale and your bad deeds on the other, and if your good deeds outweigh the bad, you are are trying to establish a righteousness of your own. Good deeds are important, but they are not the basis of our right standing before God. Our good deeds can never take away our sin; only the sacrifice of Jesus can do that. We are declared righteous by faith in Jesus.

Sometimes people think, “I’ll surely make it into heaven because I’m a better person than most people I know. I’m honest, I don’t steal, and I try to help people.” But again, that’s a righteousness of your own; God doesn’t grade on the curve. The righteousness that God supplies is through faith in Jesus. You can put your faith in Jesus here and now. Simply pray and express to God that you trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

If you have a right standing before God through faith in Jesus, you now need to make sure that your walk with Christ is based on the knowledge found in Scripture. The Bible tells us what God is like and therefore how we should relate to Him. I think that much of our frustration in the Christian life comes from assuming things about God that aren’t really true. For example, we sometimes think that God is grumpy and stingy - that He’s annoyed with our endless needs and requests. To the contrary, Jesus taught that God is a good Father who loves to give good gifts to His children; God is at least as generous

as a good earthly father. If we don't have that knowledge we won't relate to God the way His children should.

I'd like to encourage you to invest some time this week to pursue knowledge about Jesus. In your bulletin you will find a list of passages from the gospels. Each of these passages communicates something significant about Jesus and about our walk with Him. My encouragement is to meditate on each of these passages this coming week; you can take a passage a day on five different days. In a very focused way you can spend time mulling over these passages as an investment in your knowledge about Jesus that should fuel your zeal for God. As you read these passages, ask these questions:

- What does this passage teach about Jesus?
- What expectations should I have of Jesus?
- What expectations does Jesus have of me?

Pursuing Knowledge about Jesus

Matthew 11: 28-30 "Come to Me" (rest and discipleship)

Matthew 7:24-27 - Two Houses ("acting on" the words of Jesus)

Mark 8:27-38 - Following Christ (self-denial and "taking up the cross")

John 15:1-11 - Abiding in Christ (bearing fruit)

Luke 22:24-27 - Servanthood (greatness in the Kingdom)